



**UNIVERSIDAD DEL SALVADOR**

**Facultad de Filosofía y Letras**

**Doctorado en Lenguas Modernas**

USAL

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND THEIR  
GRAMMAR TEACHING PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION  
COURSES IN BUENOS AIRES**

**DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

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## DEDICATION

To my father who has taught me to believe in myself and in my dreams.

To my mother and my mother in law who have always supported me so that I would not settle with just dreaming.

To my husband who has always believed that I could make my dreams possible.

To my three beautiful daughters that have given me the strength to dream on.



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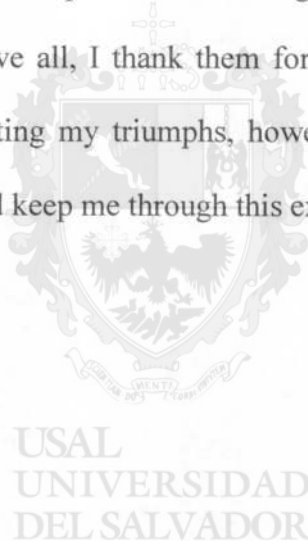
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## ABSTRACT

Many English language teachers today agree that grammar should be an integral component of any language programme. Still opinions about how it should be taught are diverse. Previous research has revealed the important role that teachers' beliefs may play in determining their professional behaviour. Teacher' beliefs may affect their actual classroom practices as well as they may suggest relevant implications for the implementation of educational innovations.

This study aims to explore the relationships between teachers' beliefs about grammar and grammar teaching and their instructional practices and examines the extent to which the beliefs of English language teachers in higher education classes inform their classroom behaviour. It focuses particularly on grammar instruction in the context of English Language classes taught in Teacher Training and Translations Courses in higher education institutions in the City of Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires.

In this dissertation, attention is first drawn to relevant issues raised in reviews of the teaching of grammar derived from SLA literature and research. Thus, part I of this study deals with the different concepts relating to knowledge in general and grammar knowledge in particular. It also reviews the various grammar schools as well as the diverse methodological trends and their relation to grammar teaching.

Part II analyses the methods and instruments used to collect data and the findings derived from the data collected.

Drawing on the data collected from the questionnaires and interviews, the results show that although teachers generally follow their pedagogic beliefs, several points of difference between their beliefs and practices exist. Responses from 25 English Language Teachers from this setting indicated that they appreciate the value of grammar and its role in language teaching. Teachers expressed strong beliefs about the need to avoid teaching grammar in isolation and reported relative levels of integration of grammar in their practices.

Key words: English Language Teaching (ELT), Grammar Teaching, Teachers' beliefs, Beliefs about Grammar.



## Resumen

Hoy en día muchos profesores de inglés están de acuerdo con que la gramática debe ser una componente integral de todo programa de lengua. Aún así las opiniones acerca de cómo esta debe enseñarse son diversas. Estudios anteriores han revelado el importante papel que tienen las creencias del profesor al condicionar su comportamiento profesional. Estas creencias pueden afectar su práctica áulica así como también podrían condicionar la implementación de innovaciones educativas.

El objetivo del presente estudio es explorar las relaciones que existen entre las creencias de los profesores con respecto a la gramática, las creencias con respecto a su enseñanza y las prácticas áulicas de los profesores de inglés. Asimismo, examina la influencia que las creencias de los profesores que dictan Lengua Inglesa en el nivel superior pueden tener en el comportamiento de los mismos dentro del aula. Se centra en particular en la enseñanza de la gramática en el contexto de las clases de lengua inglesa dictadas en los Profesorados de Inglés y Traductorados en Inglés en el nivel superior en la ciudad de Buenos Aires y Gran Buenos Aires.

Esta tesis se centra en los temas relevantes que surgen de la revisión de la literatura y las investigaciones realizadas en referencia a la enseñanza de la gramática. Por lo tanto, la primera parte de este estudio trata los distintos conceptos relacionados al conocimiento en general y al conocimiento de gramática en particular. Asimismo realiza una revisión de las distintas escuelas de gramática y de las diversas tendencias metodológicas y la relación de las mismas con la enseñanza de la gramática.

La parte II analiza los métodos e instrumentos utilizados en el presente estudio para la recolección de información y los resultados que surgen de la información obtenida.

En base a la información obtenida de los cuestionarios suministrados y entrevistas realizadas, los resultados revelan que, aunque los profesores de inglés por lo general siguen sus creencias pedagógicas, existen algunas diferencias entre sus creencias con respecto a la enseñanza de la gramática y sus prácticas en el aula. Los profesores encuestados indicaron valorar el conocimiento de gramática y el rol que la gramática tiene en una clase de lengua. Los mismos profesores expresaron una firme creencia en que la instrucción gramatical no debe realizarse de manera aislada y los resultados obtenidos revelaron niveles relativos de integración de la gramática en sus prácticas.



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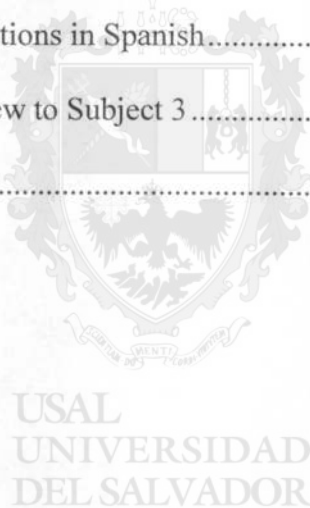
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## INTRODUCTION

Both young and experienced English language teachers alike have for long devoted time and effort to finding new resources and putting into practice new methodological approaches, techniques and strategies to aid and to improve the acquisition of English as a foreign or second language. Language acquisition and language skills have always included, at least to some extent, some knowledge of the grammar of a language, which has been regarded, at times, central to the development of English language proficiency. The history of language teaching records quite a number of debates in favour and against grammar instruction and the extent to which grammar contributes to and enhances language learning (Howatt, 1984; Kelly, 1969). Researchers and teachers alike have dissimilar opinions about this subject. The differences in attitudes and opinions of the role that grammar plays in language skills development and language acquisition have been some of the factors that have for long determined the methods, approaches and techniques employed in English as a foreign or second language classrooms.

Throughout the history of English Language Teaching (ELT) different methods and approaches have been applied to the English language classroom, and in each, the approach to grammar teaching and grammar awareness has varied. In the nineteenth century the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), also called Classical Method, was used with the aim to enable students to appreciate foreign language literature. Larsen-Freeman explains that “through the study of the grammar of the target language, students would become more familiar with the grammar of their native language and that this familiarity would help them

read and write their native language better” (2000:p.11). Thus this method took grammar as the starting point of instruction and lessons were organized around grammar points (Richards and Rodgers 1986).

In the mid nineteenth century, objections to the Grammar Translation Method was started to mount because of its bias towards written language, and it was so that, in the late nineteenth century The Direct Method started to gain ground. The basic premise was that second language learning should resemble first language acquisition (Brown, 2001). Therefore, this method focused on oral skills, spontaneous use of language, rejected explicit grammar teaching and the use of translation (Thornbury, 1999). Learning how to use a foreign language to communicate was the main objective. The basic rule in this method was sentence pattern-practice drills, which, although not dully admitted, were grammatical in origin (Thornbury, 1999). That is, language was still presented in highly structured sequences of forms, usually beginning with *to be* and proceeding through more complex forms in a linear manner, often accompanied by a formal grammar explanation (Heinkle & Fotos, 2002). Grammar was then treated inductively. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Direct Method enjoyed a considerable popularity and was widely accepted but there was a considerable decline in the use of this method and an increased return to the use of the Grammar Translation Method in the 1920s (Brown, 2001).

When World War II broke out, Americans needed to become more orally proficient in the languages of their allies and enemies. Intensive language courses that focused on oral skills (and virtually no grammar and no translation) were implemented by the US military. In the 1950s, the Army method came to be known as the Audiolingual Method (Brown, 2001). The theory of language underlying Audiolingualism was American structural linguistics (Richards and Rodgers, 1986) and thus this method upheld the belief that priority should be given to speech. It considered language as a form of behavior, and as such, rules and their application played no relevant role in language learning (Thornbury, 1999). Pedagogy in this approach was based on drills and repetitions for accurate production of the target language (Heinkle & Fotos, 2002). Students acquired the sentence patterns through the formation of the habits required to become target language speakers. The approach to grammar instruction again was basically inductive rather than deductive.

When the Chomskyan revolution changed linguists' and language teachers' focus towards the "deep structure" of a language and interest in generative transformational grammar increased, the age of Audiolingualism began its decline (Brown, 2001). Language teaching programmes started to promote a more deductive approach in language classes- Cognitive Code Learning. Grammar teaching and classroom curricula were designed to build on learners' existing knowledge, giving them opportunities to construct new meanings and emphasizing deductive learning (Heinkle & Fotos, 2002). The result was a mix of Audiolingual and Grammar Translation techniques: the typical drilling of Audiolingualism to which rule explanations and grammatical sequencing were added (Brown, 2001).

Learners were encouraged to use their innate and creative abilities to make the underlying grammatical rules of the language explicit (Richards and Rodgers, 1986).

In the 1970s, the new science of Sociolinguistics and the belief that communicative competence entails more than the knowledge of grammar rules encouraged the development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The communicative approach stems from a theory of language as communication where the goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes (1972) as cited in Richards and Rodgers (1986) referred to as “communicative competence”. Hymes’s theory was a definition of what speakers need to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). Therefore, the aim of CLT was to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching by acknowledging the interdependence of language and communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). This communicative approach included no formal grammar instruction and depended on quantities of meaning-focused input that contained target forms and vocabulary (Heinkle & Fotos, 2002). Although the communicative method of teaching does not promote the explicit teaching of grammar or correcting learner errors systematically, questions have been raised as to whether it requires a neglect of grammar-based syllabuses. For CLT proponents, language is communication and linguistic competence, which includes both the knowledge of the forms and of the functions for which language is used (Larsen Freeman, 2000).

Therefore, most methods up until the 1970s have not rejected the need for to a grammatical syllabus (Thornbury, 1999). While some methods, such as Grammar-Translation Method, favour a deductive approach to grammar and grammar instruction, others “often require learners first to study examples and work the rules out for themselves” (Thornbury, 1999:22). In terms of grammar emphasis language teaching methods and approaches could be seen along a continuum. At one end, requiring formal deductive grammar instruction we could find Grammar-Translation Method. Along the way we would find Audiolingualism and the Direct Method requiring little formal grammar instruction but still adopting a grammar based syllabus.

At the other end of this continuum, we would find The Natural Approach and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) rejecting any formal grammar teaching. According to Thornbury (1999) this view that CLT rejected grammar teaching might stem from the fact that there is a “tendency to equate grammar with accuracy” (p.23). In 1977, Terrel (1983) designed a new approach in language teaching. He joined forces with Krashen (1983) and his belief that formal instruction is unnecessary. Thus they designed the Natural Approach, which eliminates both a grammar syllabus and explicit rule teaching. It is based on the use of language in communicative situations without any reference to grammatical analysis or drilling (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). There are other approaches that make communication central: content-based, task-based and participatory approach. In these approaches learners “use English to learn it” rather than learn to use English (Larsen

Freeman, 2000:137). Nevertheless, task based learning has recently recognized the value of a focus on form (Thornbury, 1999).

Therefore, what might have changed over the years is that functional and communicative approaches to English language teaching have taken a leading role in the language classroom and might have left advanced students, in particular those in Higher Education, in need of an approach to grammar that might promote awareness of form-meaning relationships while retaining a focus on accuracy building (Hinkel and Fotos, 2002). In response to the constraints of highly communicative methodologies, a new approach to grammar instruction that combines formal instruction and communicative language use was generated. Called “focus on form”, it distinguishes “between explicit instruction of grammar forms (with an *s*) and meaning-focused use of form (no *s*) in such a way that the learner must notice, then process the target grammar structure in purely communicative input” (Heinkle & Fotos, 2002). This concept holds that traditional structural syllabuses that teach sequences of grammar forms do not produce communicative competence (Long, 1991), they just produce a formal knowledge of grammar rules unless the learners themselves have reached the stage of interlanguage development (Pienemann, 1984 as cited in Heinkle & Fotos, 2002).

Related to this notion of focus on form is the concept of “grammatical consciousness-raising”, which according to Rutherford (1987) is “the drawing of the learner's attention to



features of the target language". Rutherford regards grammatical consciousness-raising as a way of taking learners from the known to the unknown. Hence, the function of grammar consciousness-raising is to focus on certain grammatical items for the learner to develop his or her awareness of them for the moment he or she is ready to use this specific item. It is further argued that grammar consciousness-raising may help to prevent the fossilization of errors (Rogers, 1994 as cited in Ellis and Hedge, 1993) and may also accelerate the acquisition of grammatical structures in learning a second language. According to Fotos, awareness of the language feature is important because it seems to raise the learners' consciousness of the structure and to ease the restructuring of their system of linguistic knowledge (1993; 1994).

Despite the current developments as regards grammar teaching, it may be that grammar is still misunderstood in the language teaching field. The misconception might lie in the notion that grammar is basically a collection of fixed rules about the structures in a language. It is true that Traditional grammar tends to ignore the fact that a living language is constantly changing and evolving (Bourke, 2005). Traditionally, grammar has been concerned with the analysis at sentence level and a description of the rules that govern how those sentences are formed. Therefore, the ability to translate texts from and into the foreign language using target syntax and morphology accurately was regarded as an indicator of knowledge of grammar. In the seventies, the relationship between grammar and function became an issue of great interest for teachers. Many proposed that there is no need to focus explicitly on grammar since grammar is at the heart of language use and



therefore a student's ability to read, to write, to listen and to speak necessarily involve the student's ability to use the language grammatically (Alderson, 2005).

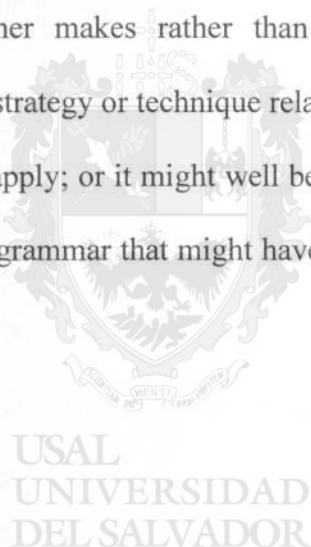
Further claims are that grammar does not need to be taught, learners will acquire it on their own (Truscott, 2007), or that when students are taught grammar as a set of rules, even if they can apply the rules to exercises successfully during the lesson, they may not be able to activate this knowledge of the rules during communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). Therefore, for years teachers have been teaching grammar and have been confronted with the sad reality that students still find it difficult to apply some rules while producing language. This has been referred to as the "the inert knowledge problem" (Whitehead, 1929 as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2003). What the inert knowledge problem describes is the disconnection teachers may find in student's productions between declarative knowledge studied in the classroom and procedural knowledge put into use in communication. In other words, the knowledge of the rules that students gain may sometimes be inactive when they try to make use of that knowledge in actual communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). In the past, these two knowledge systems were often regarded as separate systems. Recently they have been considered as connected and that one possible link might be learner's awareness or consciousness of particular grammatical features developed through formal instruction (Schmidt, 1990).

Even though explicit grammar instruction has regained a more central role in recent years, this explicit instruction still takes place beginning with an understanding of the text and its communicative intention and then looking at how the grammar helps to accomplish that intention within the specific context (Long, 1991). Placing meaning within the context of grammar is a characteristic of Halliday's systemic-functional model of grammar. What this theory implies is that learners must also have opportunities to encounter, process, and use instructed forms in their various form-meaning relationships so that the forms can become part of their inter-language behaviour (see Larsen-Freeman, 2003). However, for many language teachers, this theory has proved difficult to introduce in the language classroom.

In relying on a written language norm and in privileging the sentence as the essential unit of analysis, the language teaching profession has described language as an abstract ideal, rather than as the central aspect of human behaviour (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). If grammar is viewed as a static set of rules, then, it is likely that grammar will be taught in a static manner. Often, in English language classes, rules are read, applied to exercises and memorized. It is possible that these stages on their own may not help students become aware of the dimensions of grammar (Larsen Freeman, 2003). Therefore, a possible way to address the problem is to change the way teachers regard grammar. In order to really evaluate if a change is necessary, it seems essential however, to know what teachers think about grammar knowledge, its usefulness, and what type of grammar teaching they believe works for them and their students. Besides their professional training, the beliefs language

teachers have about grammar instruction together with their own learning and teaching experience may be some of the factors informing their classroom decisions.

In recent years educational research into teacher cognition (what teachers believe, think and do) has highlighted the role teachers' cognitive system plays in their classroom practices (Shulman, 1987 as cited in Borg, 1999). How to teach grammar, whether to teach grammar explicitly or not and how to help students use the grammar knowledge they have acquired may be a choice each teacher makes rather than an effort to apply any specific methodological approach, any strategy or technique related to the teaching of grammar they might have been instructed to apply; or it might well be a choice they make related to their own beliefs and knowledge of grammar that might have been shaped by their own learning and teaching experience .



## OBJECTIVES OF THIS WORK

The main aim of this work is to demonstrate that teachers' familiarity and knowledge of the different approaches to grammar teaching, together with the extent to which their beliefs about grammar and their previous learning experiences in dealing with grammar may affect their classroom behaviour. That is, that the choices in strategies and procedures that they make when teaching grammar and their decisions to teach it or not may be informed by their beliefs and attitudes towards grammar. A further aim is to provide some perspective on current issues and challenges concerning the role of the teaching of grammar in Language courses in Higher Education.

For the purpose of this study the term "Language courses" should be construed as English Language as a subject, taught in Teacher Training and Translation Courses in Higher Education. The present study will explore the beliefs English language teachers who teach English Language in Translation and Teacher Training courses in the City of Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires may have and how these may inform their practice.

The basic hypotheses derived from the main aim are that:

1. English Language teachers in Higher Education courses are not familiar with or have little or no knowledge about the different approaches to the teaching of grammar and show little or no interest in grammar.

2. English Language teachers in Higher Education courses do not attempt to teach grammar because they feel that their students do not need this knowledge because it is not conducive to better learning and /or to achieve acceptable performance.
3. The way English Language teachers in Higher Education deal with grammar in their courses cannot be attributed to their knowledge about the different approaches to the teaching of grammar or their lack of it, but rather to their beliefs about grammar knowledge and their beliefs about the importance of grammar.



## ORGANIZATION OF THIS WORK

This work is organized into two parts. Part I deals with the factors and variables related to the working hypothesis analyzed.

Part I is divided into four chapters that review both the literature and the research which deal with the concepts that serve as a framework and guideline for the present study.

Knowledge can be understood from different perspectives. Since the present study is mainly concerned with teachers' knowledge and their beliefs about grammar knowledge, thus Chapter 1 discusses the different types of knowledge and grammar knowledge and how these different conceptions may interrelate and operate when learning a foreign or second language, as well as how they may operate when teachers have to make decisions in the classroom. It also reviews the different ways in which grammar has been understood in the literature. The chapter concludes with an overview of the different theories and the research conducted into how grammar knowledge is acquired.

What constitutes grammar has suffered important changes throughout time. These changes have each had a direct influence on what constitutes effective grammar pedagogy. Therefore, Chapter 2 will look at the five most influential grammar schools and the changes each has produced as well as the implications each has brought to the theories of grammar teaching and the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. This chapter also

offers an overview of the different language teaching methods and the focus grammar has received in each. The selection of the teaching methods responds to the change each of the reviewed methods has caused in the ELT scene and the different perspectives that each has presented in the teaching of grammar. It also highlights the arguments for grammar teaching and against grammar teaching that have operated along the years.

Taking into account that grammar instruction can take many forms and be carried out with various pedagogical goals in mind and that it can benefit diverse types of learners by increasing their overall proficiency and improving their language skills, Chapter 3 analyses the different conceptions of grammar teaching and the most relevant approaches that the literature has to offer. Keeping in mind the extraordinarily diverse and numerous settings in which ESL/ EFL is taught, the selection of perspectives and approaches in this chapter presents the why's and the how-to's of grammar teaching relevant to the context proposed in this study. The chapter focuses on the possible ways to integrate grammar in second and foreign language curricula in Higher Education contexts and points out the reasons that make grammar teaching necessary in this particular area.

Chapter 4 presents a review of the previous research conducted in to the field of teacher cognition. Although much has been said in the field of Second Language Acquisition about the different methods, theories and research supporting formal grammar instruction or supporting its elimination and about the controversy these views have generated, the

cognitive bases of teachers' instructional decisions in grammar teaching are relatively unexplored. This section, therefore, reviews some of the studies that have been conducted into teacher cognition, what language teachers know and think, and grammar instruction that may shed some light into the issue and which provide a context for this work.

Part II deals with the study, its design and reports its findings. This part is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 in this part deals with the design of the study and the detailed analysis of the instruments used to collect data. It provides information about the aims and scope of the design and the methodology that has been used.

Chapter 2 presents detailed analyses of the data collected from the surveys administered to the 25 English language teachers that constituted the sample population analysed as well as from the interviews conducted to 5 English language teachers which have helped to gain greater insight into teachers' cognition. Chapter 3 reports the conclusions drawn from the findings of the field work as relating to the proposed hypothesis.



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**PART I**  
**CHAPTER 1**  
**ABOUT KNOWLEDGE AND GRAMMAR**

**DEFINING KNOWLEDGE AND GRAMMAR**

In order to analyze the different approaches to the teaching of grammar and their application in today's ESL/EFL classroom, it seemed necessary to address the problem of what constitutes knowledge and, more specifically, knowledge of grammar. The need stems from the fact that one of the objectives of this work is centered on teachers' beliefs about grammar knowledge and whether they believe knowledge of grammar is helpful for their students and the extent to which they believe knowledge of grammar is conducive to better learning and how they believe knowledge of grammar operates in achieving acceptable performance.

It also seemed necessary to analyze on what kind of knowledge teachers based their beliefs and classroom practices. Therefore, the following section will examine knowledge and the different types of knowledge analyzed in the literature. There may be a relationship between teachers' technical knowledge -that is the instruction they have received on how, when and why to teach grammar-, and their practical knowledge -that is their previous

experience in both learning grammar and how they were taught grammar- to their attempts to teach their learners and address their special needs. Therefore, grammar knowledge and how it might operate will also be reviewed.

## **ABOUT KNOWLEDGE**

According to Plato, three conditions must be met in order for one to possess knowledge. This is known as the tripartite theory of knowledge and it analyses knowledge as justified true belief. To hold a belief in something is considered a true belief, and thus, it can be considered knowledge. According to this theory three conditions must be met for knowledge to be considered as such. The first condition for knowledge is belief. Unless one believes a thing, one cannot know it. Although something may be true, one cannot know it without believing it. Knowledge, thus, requires belief. However, there is a second condition which is truth. If something is known, then logically, it must be true. If a belief is not true, it cannot be considered knowledge. If a belief is proved to be false, then it must be admitted that what was thought to be known was in fact not known. Therefore, knowledge is such only if it is knowledge of the truth. However, in order for knowledge to be considered as such, the mere belief is not enough. Justification is another required element, that is to say, good reasons for believing.

Although the tripartite theory of knowledge has been rejected after Edmund Gettier's critique of it in the 60s it is intuitively very plausible and is still used as a working model. Since one of the central objectives of this work is to analyze whether the knowledge of

grammar ESL teachers have, or the lack of it, may be considered an influential factor in their teaching of grammar, it seems possible to address the question of what really constitutes knowledge of grammar. Therefore, taking this theory into account, it follows that knowledge of grammar can only be considered knowledge if it is believed to be knowledge of the truth and there are good **reasons** to believe so. That is to say, one must believe that the rules that are known, for example, and that they are true. Only then can those rules be considered knowledge of grammar. However, it follows that this is not enough to constitute knowledge of grammar unless there is a justification, the third element. Justification can be explained as good reasons to believe that something is true. Therefore unless a teacher knows that the rules she or he believes in are true, and unless there is a good reason to believe so, there is no real knowledge. Teachers' beliefs in grammar rules, their truth and reasons to believe in them will be explored later in this work.

#### **TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE**

Therefore, in order to determine if or how teachers' beliefs about the knowledge of grammar can influence their teaching and their classroom behaviour towards grammar, a further aspect of knowledge should be taken into consideration.

Knowledge is typically divided into three categories: personal, procedural, and propositional. Personal knowledge is the type of knowledge that people claim to have when